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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MUSTAFA

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SUBJECT: PALESTINIAN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ELECTIONS SITREP
#7: JANUARY 17, 2006: ISRAELI/PALESTINIAN OFFICIALS DISCUSS
TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF JERUSALEM VOTING

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Palestinian and Israeli officials met January 16 to work on technical issues relating to voting in East Jerusalem. Officials discussed the possibility of issuing 6,000 tickets to East Jerusalem residents to allow them to vote at designated post offices. Both sides are scheduled to meet January 17 for additional talks. There is no resolution yet to an Israeli demand that Hamas not appear on ballots in Jerusalem. Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) January 15 reportedly ordered PA Security Chiefs to defend polling stations with force, if necessary. Israeli Police arrested Hamas candidates January 15 who attempted to hold a press conference in Jerusalem's Old City. End summary.

Technical Discussions Held
Over Jerusalem Voting Modalities

¶2. (C) Representatives from the Central Elections Commission (CEC) and the PLO Negotiations Support Unit January 16 met in Jerusalem with officials from the Jerusalem Police, the Israeli Postal Service, the IDF, and the Ministry of Justice to discuss modalities for Palestinian voting in East Jerusalem. According to Palestinian contacts, discussions focused on the need for an "open" voter list since no registration was conducted for East Jerusalem residents. The representatives considered a plan whereby 6,000 tickets would be distributed to Jerusalem residents on a first-come, first-serve basis to vote in one of six post offices. The majority of tickets (3,500) would be issued for the Salah al-Din Post office, with remaining 2,500 tickets dispersed evenly (500 apiece) for the other five post offices. Tickets would be issued in advance of Election Day at special CEC offices set up for this purpose. (Note: The proposed ticketing system is designed to avoid the confusion faced by Jerusalem voters during the January 2005 PA Presidential elections. End note.)

¶3. (C) Jerusalem Police Chief Major General Franco, who attended the January 16 meeting, informed the Palestinian side that he would consider easing movement restrictions across checkpoints on Election Day to allow access for East Jerusalem residents who cannot vote at the post offices to polling centers outside of Jerusalem. Franco added that he would raise these issues with senior Israeli Government officials and provide responses during a scheduled January 17 meeting. (Note: The representatives agreed to defer discussion of the Israeli demand that Hamas not be listed on the ballots in Jerusalem. End note.)

14. (C) PA Minister of State Hind Khoury complained to the Consul General on January 17 that Israeli restrictions on campaigning and voting were discouraging voters in Jerusalem. The continued uncertainty about election modalities has confused voters and delayed the CEC's voter education program. Khoury commented that the Israelis are not even allowing the "1996 arrangements" to be used, noting that Jerusalem municipal employees are removing campaign posters as quickly as activists post them. Factions have been fined for using billboards set aside by the municipality for the election because they don't obtain the required permits in advance.

Abu Mazen Tells Security
Chiefs "To Defend Elections"

15. (C) During a January 15 meeting with PA security chiefs, Abu Mazen reportedly gave instructions that security forces secure the PLC elections by force, if necessary. Abu Mazen said that he knew of groups and individuals who would attempt to sabotage the election process, but he nonetheless expected the PASF to be prepared for any eventuality. He indicated that he had accepted the security plan submitted to him by PA Minister of Interior Nasser Yusif. (Note: Palestinian factions rejected a MOI proposal to put aside their weapons in the run-up to and during the PLC elections. End note.)

Hamas Candidates
Detained In Jerusalem

16. (C) Israeli Police January 15 arrested Hamas candidates, running on the "Change and Reform" list, who attempted to conduct a press conference near an entrance to

the Old City. The candidates were released from custody on January 16. Elsewhere in Jerusalem, Israeli Police raided the campaign offices of the al-Badil national list ("The Alternative", a coalition of the DFLP, Palestinian People's Party, FIDA, and independents), confiscating documents and arresting five activists. In the West Bank, the IDF arrested approximately 49 Palestinians January 14-16 in several localities, including Tulkarm, Qalqilya, Jenin, and Hebron. Hamas claimed that 15 of its activists arrested in Tulkarm and Qalqilya included several involved in campaign activity in the Northern West Bank.

Fatah Ramps Up
Campaign Activity

17. (C) According to Palestinian contacts, Fatah campaign activity increased in recent days, with candidates organizing rallies and town-hall style meetings. Fatah candidates running in the district races have begun to appear at meetings together. Fatah activists have also been observed affixing posters, tickers, and photos of Fatah candidates running on the national list and in the districts. At least 29 Fatah-affiliated independent candidates have indicated their intention to withdraw from the district races, a move that could improve prospects of the "official" Fatah candidates. (Note: There are more than 100 Fatah-affiliated independents remaining in the district races. End note.)

Summary of Local
Press Coverage

18. (SBU) Al-Quds January 17 led with a report that European officials were unhappy with Israeli attempts to prevent Hamas from participating in the PLC elections. A statement issued by the European Commission January 16 announced that such actions threatened the democratic process in the Palestinian territories. All three Palestinian dailies reported that Secretary Rice recently said that

Hamas' participation in any new government might harm Washington attempts to support the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Rice was also quoted that any new Palestinian government must respect the spirit and rules of the Quartet Roadmap.

-- Al-Quds reported that Gaza Hamas leader Mahmud al-Zahar said that Hamas has not made a decision yet on its participation in a Palestinian government following the legislative elections.

-- Al-Quds reported that the Israeli authorities prohibited Palestinians from holding a meeting January 16 in the Old City of Jerusalem to support candidates, despite Israel's decision to allow campaigning in Jerusalem.

-- Ma'an News reported that Shaykh Nafiz Azzam, an Islamic Jihad leader, reiterated the movement's boycott of the PLC elections, clarifying that members of Islamic Jihad will not participate in the elections either as candidates or as voters.

-- Palestinian Wafa news agency reported that three Jerusalem candidates and some of their supporters were assaulted and arrested by Israeli security forces on January 15 as they were campaigning in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Op-eds:

-- Al-Quds ran an op-ed by Anwar Khaled Badr, who wrote that Hamas members are planning to drastically change their ideology and tactics after the elections.

-- Al-Quds ran a political cartoon depicting a balloting box as a tomb, with the word "Jerusalemmites", and surrounded by cactus plants and barbed wire along with a Palestinian flag on the side.

January 13-16 Summary
of Local Press Coverage

19. (SBU) In a January 15 press interview reported in al-Quds, al-Ayyam, and al-Hayat al-Jadida on January 16, PA President Abbas expressed happiness that Palestinian democracy is moving forward and growing. Abbas told the three dailies that the Palestinian security forces have developed a plan to protect ballot boxes and that he

personally informed security forces not to allow any armed persons, including body guards, to stand close to these boxes. Abbas also said that he would not run for a second term as president.

-- Al-Quds reported January 16 that, despite an Israeli decision to allow campaigning in Jerusalem, Israeli police closed down Hamas campaign offices in Jerusalem on January 15 and arrested four Hamas candidates.

-- Al-Quds January 15 reported that President Abbas rejected any external intervention in the PLC elections and expressed his opposition to threats launched by the U.S. in severing assistance to the PA should Hamas participate in a future government.

-- Al-Quds carried a front page interview with Sa'ed Siam, a Hamas candidate in the Gaza Strip, who indicated that the Hamas electoral program centers on change and reform in the political, economic, social, health, and education areas. In a related report, Hamas leader and PLC candidate Isma'il Hanniyah announced to the press that a major European country is willing to deal with Hamas should it win in the elections.

WALLES